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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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It was only a matter of time before the topic of internet sales tax made headlines again. This time around, it's Massachusetts wants to tax its residents for purchases made on the internet, outside of the Commonwealth. This is nothing new, but just the fact that various states are looking for ways to increase its coffers in these tough economic times is bothersome. In this week's issue, we've included an article that makes some good points about the issue.

Y'know something, perhaps if states found ways to curb the majority of their excessive and needless spending, they may have the cash to spend on the important things. States are taxing its citizens on just about everything these days, and looking for the means to tax us even more! It's more than ridiculous these days!

The United States political system can't come up with a budget plan that will appease the Democrats and Republicans? Oh well, let the government shut down until it does! Wonderful system! I call that political blackmail, with worse results.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not anti-tax. But I am against unfair taxes just to be able to pay for some politician's new program that is needless and unwarranted. If states want to raise some revenue, let them do what many organizations do, and have done for years - have a bake sale!!

Elsewhere in this issue you'll read that Commodore has announced "new" Commodore 64 and VIC 20 computer systems. For nostalgia buffs, I think it's a great idea. Now if we could get someone to take over the old Atari systems licenses and introduce some new Atari machines. Just bring them all into this new generation of computers, with a little bit of the old thrown in. Is it possible? Well, ask Commodore!

It's been another long week, and a tiring one, so before I zonk out due to tiredness, I'll keep my diatribes short!

Until next time...

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Commodore Announces New Commodore64, VIC Computers

Commodore, the legendary brand that helped drive home computing with an emphasis on entertainment, has opened a Web store where consumers can buy a modernized Commodore 64 and two new versions of the VIC, now redesigned as a "keyboard computer".

The new Commodore 64 costs anywhere from $250 for a "barebones" configuration for modders, to an $895 "ultimate" configuration with a terabyte hard drive, Blu-ray., and wireless. The VIC-Pro costs $495 to $1,195, while the VIC-SLIM costs $295 to $495.

Commodore also posted some basic specs of three new Amiga models: the 1000, 2000, and 3000.

Strangely, the new offerings bear almost no similarity to what Commodore showed off behind closed doors at this year’s CES. Then, the company emphasized smartphone apps and gaming, and the E715 all-in-one PC. Instead, the company’s Web site now focuses almost exclusively on updating the company’s iconic machines of yesteryear with modern components.

Although Commodore celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2007, the company has languished in obscurity for many of those years, a faint shell of the company that helped launched computing and computer games.

"I’m sure you’ll appreciate the Commodore thing has been in a state of flux over the last 20 years," Peter Bromage, the vice president of sales and marketing for Commodore said in January. "But now the ownership is resolved, we 100 percent own the brand."

Although the Commodore 64 appears on the Commodore site in prototype form, the company said it has designed it to be a "modern functional PC as close to the original in design as humanly possible," even with the original taupe brown/beige color.

Aside from the barebones model, the C64x, as the company calls it, includes a 1.8-GHz D525 CPU, Nvidia Ion2 graphics (with 512 Mbytes of graphics RAM), either 2 or 4 Gbytes of memory, with options for Wi-Fi, DVD, Blu-ray, and either a 160-, 250-, or 500-Gbyte hard drive.

The computer also features a Cherry-made "clicky" keyboard.

And what OS will it run? Not Windows, at least natively. "Units come with the Ubuntu 10.04 LTS operating system on disk ready to install," Commodore said. "Commodore OS 1.0, along with emulation functionality and classic game package, will be mailed to purchasers when available."

The VIC-PRO appears to be a massive update to the VIC-20, a 1980 8-bit personal computer that followed the PET into market. Like the C64x, it’s available in several (three) versions, from $495 to $1,195.

It measures 17.5 inches wide and only 2 inches tall, Commodore said.

Commodore has based the VIC-PRO on the Intel Core 2 processor, either the 2.93-GHz E7500 Core 2 Duo or the 3.0-GHz Q9650 Core 2 Quad. Commodore also offers either 2- or 4-Gbyte memory options. Wi-Fi, a tray DVD drive are options, and users have a choice between either a 500-Gbyte or a 1-Tbyte hard drive.

Connectivity options include four USB ports, a parallel port, 2 serial

ports, 2 PS2 ports, VGA out and dual DVI connections. Stereo speakers are also included, as well as LED lights to show the status of hard drive, LAN, and keyboard functions.

Like its name, Commodore’s specifications for the "slim" version of the VIC are slim as well.

The VIC-SLIM measures 17.5 inches wide and 2.0 inches tall, and weighs 7.4 pounds.

Inside, the unit contains a 1.8-GHz Intel Atom D525, the Intel GMA3150 graphics chipset, either 1- or 2 Gbytes of memory, dedicated Wi-Fi/Bluetooth, and either a 250- or 500-Gbyte 2.5-inch, removable hard drive. Like the other models, it ships with the Ubuntu 10.04 OS; "Commodore OS 1.0, along with emulation functionality and classic game package, will be mailed to purchasers when available," Commodore said.

The VIC-SLIM includes 5 USB 2.0 ports, VGA out, RJ45, DC-in and COM, but apparently no DVI connection.

Commodore provided physical dimensions for the new Amiga models, but very few specifics on what they contain. For example, the Amiga 1000, the slimmest model of the Amiga family, is a desktop PC based on the micro ATX form factor, with two standard full-height expansion slots, a FireWire port, 2 USB 2.0 ports, and some card reader options. But the available CPU, storage, and memory options have been left out, for now.

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Anonymous Vows Payback Against Sony!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Atari’s Greatest Hits on iTunes!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Anonymous Vows Payback for Case Against PS3 Hacker

Internet vigilante group Anonymous has vowed retribution against Sony for taking legal action against hackers that cracked PlayStation 3 (PS3) defenses to change console operating software.

A message signed by Anonymous at website anonnews.org on Monday announced an "Operation Payback" campaign aimed at the Japanese consumer electronics titan because of its cases against George "GeoHot" Hotz and Alexander Egorenkov.

"Your recent legal actions against fellow internet citizens, GeoHot and Graf_Chokolo (Egorenkov) have been deemed an unforgivable offense against free speech and Internet freedom," the message read.

Anonymous argued that people who bought PS3 consoles have the right to do what they wish with them, including modify them in whatever manner they wish.

The hacker group threatened to retaliate against Sony by attacking the company's websites.

Sony went to court early this year to stop hackers that figured out how to "jailbreak" PS3 consoles to operate on software other than that originally installed by the firm.

A judge granted Sony a restraining order against Hotz, a 23-year-old New Jersey resident, and opposing sides are wrangling over the company's request to have the case heard in a federal district court in California.

Sony wants Hotz taken task for violations of the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act and a Computer Fraud Abuse Act. The case against Egorenkov, who also maintains his innocence, is playing out in Germany.

Hotz has denied doing anything wrong. Sony has reportedly tried to find out whether other hackers helped Hotz or if he shared his PS3 breakthrough with others.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Game On: Atari Unleashes Greatest Hits On iTunes

From "King of Kong" to Google's productivity-zapping reboot of Pac-Man, retro gaming is firmly etched in the zeitgeist. And now grown-up kids can re-live their arcade-centric youth in all its quarter-scrounging glory with the release of Atari's Greatest Hits for Apple's iOS.

The Atari package available on iTunes for the iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad includes a free version of Pong plus 17 more classic Atari arcade games and 92 Atari 2600 games. Customers can purchase 25 separate four-game packs for $0.99 apiece or 100 games for $14.99.

The games require systems with iOs 3.0 or better. Bluetooth Mutliplayer for head-to-head play on titles such as Pong and Warlords is available, and the package comes with original cabinet and box art.

Multiple versions of ultra-popular games like Asteroids are listed (shield loyalists and hyperspace partisans can both rejoice - both versions of the game are available). But so are the more obscure games that only a rare few mastered, if only because the big kids were hogging

the Pac-Man and Centipede machines.

Yes, Tempest, we’re looking at you.

The full Atari’s Greatest Hits lineup includes the following separate game packs:

Asteroid Pack (Asteroids, Asteroids Deluxe, Asteroids 2600, Canyon Bomber - Bluetooth Multiplayer)

Battlezone Pack (Battlezone, Red Baron, Air-Sea Battle - BLUETOOTH MULTIPLAYER, Submarine Commander)

Centipede Pack (Centipede, Millipede, Centipede 2600, Millipede 2600)

Black Widow Pack (Black Widow, Space Duel - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Desert Falcon, Space War)

Crystal Castles Pack (Crystal Castles, Crystal Castles 2600, Surround - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Maze Craze)

Gravitar Pack (Gravitar, Gravitar 2600, Radar Lock, Demons to Diamonds - Bluetooth Multiplayer)

Star Raiders Pack (Star Raiders, Liberator, Star Ship - BLUETOOTH MULTIPLAYER, Human Cannonball)

Missile Command Pack (Missile Command, Missile Command 2600, Fun with Numbers, Flag Capture - Bluetooth Multiplayer)

Lunar Lander Pack (Lunar Lander, Sky Diver - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Video Pinball, Code Breaker)

Super Breakout Pack (Super Breakout, Breakout - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Off-the-Wall, Circus Atari - Bluetooth Multiplayer)

Tempest Pack (Tempest - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Tempest 2600 - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Outlaw, Atari Video Cube)

Major Havoc Pack (Major Havoc, Secret Quest, Sentinel, Yars’ Revenge - Bluetooth Multiplayer)

Warlords Pack (Warlords - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Warlords 2600, Combat - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Combat 2 - Bluetooth Multiplayer)

Adventure Pack (Adventure, Haunted House, Return to Haunted House, Save Mary)

Tic-Tac-Toe Pack (3D Tic-Tac-Toe, A Game of Concentration, Backgammon, Brain Games)

Fatal Run Pack (Fatal Run, Dodge ’Em, Night Driver, Street Racer - Bluetooth Multiplayer)

Quadrun Pack (Quadrun, Slot Racers - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Stellar Track, Math Gran Prix)

Casino Pack (Casino - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Slot Machine, Video Checkers, Video Chess)

Sword Quest Pack (Sword Quest Earthworld, Sword Quest Fireworld, Sword Quest Waterworld, Sprintmaster)

Championship Soccer Pack (Championship Soccer - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Golf, Double Dunk, Basketball)

Football Pack (Football - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Home Run, Miniature Golf, Bowling)

Real Sports Basketball Pack (Real Sports Basketball - BLUETOOTH MULTIPLAYER, Real Sports Boxing - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Real Sports Tennis - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Real Sports Baseball - BLUETOOTH MULTIPLAYER)

Real Sports Football Pack (Real Sports Football - BLUETOOTH MULTIPLAYER, Real Sports Soccer - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Real Sports Volleyball - Bluetooth Multiplayer, Video Olympics - Bluetooth Multiplayer)

Battlezone Pack (Battlezone 2600, Super Breakout 2600, Super Baseball, Super Football)

Hangman Pack (Hangman, Black Jack, Steeplechase)

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

House Votes To Repeal Regs on Internet Access

House Republicans adamant that the government keep its hands off the Internet passed a bill Friday to repeal federal rules barring Internet service providers from blocking or interfering with traffic on their networks.

Republicans, in voting to repeal rules on "network neutrality" set down by the Federal Communications Commission, said the FCC lacked the authority to promulgate the rules. They disputed the need to intervene in an already open Internet and warned that the rules would stifle investment in broadband systems.

"The FCC power grab would allow it to regulate any interstate communication service on barely more than a whim and without any additional input from Congress," said Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., sponsor of the legislation. The Internet, he added, "is open and innovative thanks to the government's hands-off approach."

But in what has become a largely partisan battle, the Democrat-controlled Senate is not expected to go along with the House. Sen. John D. Rockefeller, D-W.Va., chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, said he was "disappointed that House leadership wants to undo the integrity of the FCC's process and unravel their good work."

Even if it cleared Congress, the White House has threatened to veto a bill it said puts in doubt whether "the democratic spirit of the Internet will remain intact."

Rep. Henry Waxman of California, top Democrat on the Energy and Commerce Committee, said nullifying the FCC rules would "give big phone and cable companies control over what websites Americans can visit, what applications they can run and what devices they can use."

The vote to pass the bill, mainly along party lines, was 240-179.

The FCC rules were adopted on a 3-2 vote last December after years of debate over the federal role in ensuring a free and open Internet. The FCC's three Democrats voted in support and its two Republicans opposed.

While generally seen as a compromise between technology companies fearing provider limitations on their access to the Internet and the big phone and cable companies insisting they need flexibility to manage Internet traffic, the rules drew a quick legal challenge from Verizon Communications Inc., which said the FCC had overstepped its authority.

A year ago a federal appeals court also ruled that the FCC exceeded its authority in sanctioning Comcast Corp. for discriminating against online file-sharing traffic Comcast said was clogging its network.

The rules prohibit phone and cable companies from favoring or discriminating against Internet content and services, including online calling services such as Skype and Web video services such as Netflix that could compete with their core operations. They require broadband providers to let subscribers access all legal online content.

They do give providers flexibility to manage data on their systems to deal with network congestion and unwanted traffic as long as they publicly disclose those practices. They do not specifically ban "paid prioritization," where a provider might charge more for faster transmission of data, but they outlaw "unreasonable network discrimination."

Wireless carriers are also barred from blocking access to any websites or competing services, but they are given more leeway to manage data traffic because wireless systems have less network bandwidth.

Even supporters acknowledged that the rules are mainly about preserving the status quo of a system that is generally working well.

But absent the rules, said Rep. Jared Polis, D-Colo., "there would be a major shift in power on the Internet to the broadband providers from the content providers."

He said there was legitimate fear among nonprofit and religious groups that they would be consigned to a lower tier because they could not pay a higher price for premium service. "So your Web page from Nike might load faster than your Web page from the Catholic Church because, if there was tiered access, who would be more likely to pay for the speed of the access?"

He also cited the actions of autocratic states such as China in blocking Internet content in saying the government must make clear that providers cannot discriminate against customers because of political or

philosophical differences.

The bill is H.J.Res. 37

Appeals Court Knocks Down Verizon Net Neutrality Challenge

An appeals court Monday dismissed Verizon’s challenge of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission’s December net neutrality ruling, calling it premature.

A three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia noted in its decision that the FCC’s net neutrality order is a rule-making document subject to judicial review once it is published in the Federal Register. The panel said that the appeal’s "prematurity is incurable."

In its December ruling, the FCC voted to prohibit broadband service providers from selectively blocking or slowing Web content and applications. As expected, the ruling unleashed protests from an array of big service providers.

Verizon appealed the FCC ruling on Jan. 20.

"We are deeply concerned by the FCC’s assertion of broad authority for sweeping new regulation of broadband networks and the Internet itself," said Michael Glover, Verizon’s senior vice president and deputy general counsel, in a statement accompanying the challenge.

Backers of the net neutrality ruling Monday hailed the appeals court’s decision.

"This is hardly surprising," said a statement from Andrew Jay Schwartzman, senior vice president and policy director of the Media Access Project. "Verizon tried to game the system by attempting to challenge the FCC’s open Internet decision prior to its official release. ... The future of the Internet is too important for such legal shenanigans. Notwithstanding Verizon’s ploy, this case will be heard in the right court, at the right time."

Internet Sales Tax Is a Tariff Not a Tax

There has been an ongoing debate about sales tax on the net with one side saying that net sales are killing the brick and mortar stores by offering better deals, and the other side saying the net needs to be protected so it can grow bigger and be taxed later when it’s big.

It should never be taxed.

This debate actually goes back to the roots of the mail order business which was not taxed except in the state in which it exists. So this is not a new debate or a new idea. And mail order sites are pretty much the same as Internet sites when it’s all is said and done.

In fact, the old mail order companies had the same price and selection

advantages/disadvantages as any Internet sales site. They are the exact same thing.

The big difference is that Amazon came around and Jeff Bezos is an obvious retailing genius. So because of his success, everything is different? No, it’s not different; we just have interesting new players.

So out-of-the-blue the Retailer Association of Massachusetts is pushing a bill to collect taxes from individuals in the state who buy anything on the Internet. These Inter-state collection mechanisms have yet to work ,and I’m guessing that MA users will have to voluntarily turn over taxes. Whatever the case, this will not work.

What I fear is a convoluted national system that collects taxes through some massive mechanism.

Taxes are bad and should be resisted by every citizen. I am appalled by people who love taxes and insist on more taxes. With State income tax, property tax, sales tax, airport tax, car rental fees, Federal Income tax, excise taxes, liquor taxes, gas taxes and on and on, we have more than enough taxes. We must be the most taxed people in the world.

Our ridiculous corporate income tax is 35 percent - the highest in the world. That tax is merely passed on to the consumer resulting in 35 percent higher prices. The higher price is taxed with a sales tax at 35 percent higher than what it would have been without the corporate tax, resulting in more taxes collected. It’s a complete scam.

I could go on and on about this, but suffice it to say we are over-taxed. So why add another new bogus tax?

The fact is that Amazon is in Washington State, and it pays plenty of money for state and county services, such as sewers, power connections, and roads. Local taxes go to that. Why should Massachusetts be collecting taxes when none of that benefits Amazon?

You do know that taxes are collected to benefit you, right? You pay city taxes to have a police force and fire department. You pay state taxes for roads and infrastructure. Taxes are not just collected to steal money.

So how does Amazon benefit from taxes collected by Massachusetts? This is not a tax it is a penalty fine or a tariff for competing with local businesses. To be honest about it, they should call it a tariff, not a tax. Be honest about it. Oh wait; a tariff would be illegal, wouldn’t it?

And before you say Amazon benefits from the roads to deliver the books, UPS already paid for that.

If a company is not doing physical business in a state and is taxed, then it is an interstate tariff, which is unconstitutional. It will lead to California adding a tariff to Florida oranges and tariffs on wine and everything else going state to state.

This idea should go away fast. Pass it and a nightmare begins.

Targeted Nature of Email Breach Worries Experts

Think twice next time you get an email from Chase or Citi asking you to log in to your credit card account. The bank may not have sent it.

A security breach that exposed the email addresses of potentially millions of customers of major U.S. banks, hotels and stores is more likely than traditional scams to ultimately trick people into revealing personal information.

Security experts said Monday they were alarmed that the breach involved targeted information - tying individuals to businesses they patronize - and could make customers more likely to reveal passwords, Social Security numbers and other sensitive data.

The company that was in charge of the email addresses, a Dallas marketing firm called Epsilon, handles online marketing for some of the biggest names in business. Those companies have flooded customers in recent days with warnings to be on guard.

Epsilon said that while hackers had stolen customer email addresses, a rigorous assessment determined that no other personal information was compromised. By itself, without passwords and other sensitive data, email addresses are of little use to criminals. But they can be used to craft dangerous online attacks.

Citi credit card customers, for example, are more likely to respond to an email claiming to be from Citigroup than from a random bank. The email might direct the customer to a site that looks like the bank’s site, capture login information and use it to access the real account.

David Jevans, chairman and founder of the nonprofit Anti-Phishing Working Group, said criminals have been moving away from indiscriminate email scams, known as "phishing," toward more intelligent attacks known as "spear phishing," which rely on more intimate knowledge of victims.

"This data breach is going to facilitate that in a big way," said Jevans, also CEO of security company IronKey Inc. "Now they know which institution people bank with, they know their name and they have their email address."

The information could also help criminals send highly personalized emails to victims. Doing so makes the email more likely to get past a spam filter.

Epsilon, a unit of Alliance Data Systems Corp., sends more than 40 billion emails a year and has more than 2,500 business clients. Stock in the parent company fell $1.73, or 2 percent, to close Monday at $84.20.

Meanwhile, more than a dozen companies contacted customers to instruct them never to reveal personal information in response to an email.

Financial institutions affected include Barclays Bank, Capital One Financial Corp., Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase and U.S. Bancorp. The parent companies of Best Buy, Ethan Allen furniture stores, the Kroger grocery chain, the Home Shopping Network and Walgreens drugstores issued similar warnings, as did the Hilton and Marriott hotel chains. The College Board, the not-for-profit organization that runs the SATs, also warned that a hacker may have obtained student email addresses.

Many of the companies contacted by The Associated Press declined comment or referred reporters to statements acknowledging the breach. Epsilon

also declined further comment. Some of the companies said Epsilon has referred the breach to unspecified authorities.

For victims of this type of security breach, there is little to do but be vigilant. Changing passwords doesn't help.

Jill Kocher of Crystal Lake, Ill., said she got at least five emailed warnings, including from U.S. Bank, Best Buy and clothier New York & Co. Because she works for Groupon, an Internet coupon company, she said she feels savvy enough to avoid any phishing come-ons. But she's concerned for those who aren't.

"U.S. Bank sends you an email and it looks legit and you cough up the information, and now you're in big trouble. It sure does sound like a big increase in fraud just waiting to happen," Kocher said.

The attack offers a window into a business that serves a vital role in the Internet age for companies looking for effective ways to find customers, sell to them, and figure out what they might want to buy in the future.

Epsilon is a big moneymaker for Alliance Data Systems. Epsilon turned $65 million in operating profit last year, and its $613 million in revenue was 22 percent of Alliance Data Systems' total.

Companies like Epsilon send emails to customers on behalf of companies, using vast stores of data and millions of addresses. Companies are eager to give up information about their customers - if the third parties such as Epsilon can do a better job at enticing them to spend.

So for example, an email that a retailer blasts to customers about an upcoming sale on big-screen TVs might not actually come from the company at all. A company such as Epsilon might be the one that analyzed the spending of that store's customers and decided which ones would be most likely to buy a big-screen TV.

Dave Frankland, an analyst with Forrester Research who studies Epsilon and other businesses that specialize in "customer intelligence," said large companies often outsource their email marketing to avoid being having their messages zapped by email service providers' spam filters. Companies such as Epsilon work with the email providers to ensure that their customers' messages aren't blocked as spam. He said that is a job that requires daily attention.

Frankland said the industry's reputation will take a hit because the breach exposed how much the relationships between companies such as Epsilon and their customers depend on trust.

"At first glance, I shrug my shoulders and go, 'Oh my goodness - a spammer knows my name,'" he said. "I get enough spam; that isn't new. But the bigger concern is when someone gets an email from one of these blue chip companies and it looks genuine. That's when I get very concerned."

But he added: "The industry should be looking at this as a let-off. This could have been a heck of a lot worse. It's not just Epsilon - it's an industry issue, and this could have been any of them."

Breaches involving millions of customers have happened before. In one of the largest, more than 45 million credit and debit cards were exposed to

possible fraud because of hackers broke into the computer system of TJX Cos., the parent company of retailers T.J. Maxx and Marshall's, starting in 2005.

And last month, RSA, the security division of data storage company EMC, acknowledged that its computer network was hacked. The implications are serious because RSA's technology underpins the security of some of the world's most closely guarded data. RSA makes small security devices that supply constantly changing numbers that are used as secondary passwords for accessing corporate networks and email.

If the attacker managed to steal the codes that determine which numbers appear on the tokens, that information could be used to perform mass infiltrations - if the attacker already has other information about the targets. That information can be gleaned from the type of "spear phishing," or targeted phishing, emails that the Epsilon breach can enable.

"I'm a little concerned that there's a big pattern going on here of very major breaches, where if you combine that information together, you could launch some pretty major attacks that would be very successful," Jevans said.

California Lawmaker Touts Do-Not-Track Bill

A state senator in California has introduced a bill that would allow Web surfers to opt out of online tracking efforts by websites and advertising networks.

State Senator Alan Lowenthal, a Long Beach Democrat, and Consumer Watchdog, a privacy group that supports the bill, detailed the bill in a press conference Monday. Lowenthal originally introduced a placeholder bill in February, then amended the bill March 24 to include new do-not-track language.

"Nearly 80 percent of Californians use the Internet and nearly 45 percent use Facebook - including myself," Lowenthal said in a statement. "But today millions of Californians are unaware that their online behavior is being tracked; their data collected and sold to advertisers."

Lowenthal's legislation, designated as a computer spyware bill, would direct the California attorney general to adopt regulations requiring Web companies that collect personal data to allow users to opt out of data collection and online tracking.

The regulations would also require Web companies doing business in California to inform users of their collection and tracking efforts, and it would allow civil lawsuits against companies that fail to comply with the regulations.

The bill would hurt the Internet, said Steve DelBianco, executive director of NetChoice, an e-commerce trade group.

"Consumer Watchdog is backing a California version of do-not-track that would impose $1,000 class-action lawsuits for every technical violation," he said. "The plaintiff's bar in California must be salivating over this. And the bill lets the attorney general create new

rules without hearings or showing evidence of harm."

In February, U.S. Representative Jackie Speier, a California Democrat, introduced a similar bill in Congress that would direct the U.S. Federal Trade Commission to create standards for a nationwide do-not-track mechanism.

In December, the FTC recommended that the technology industry create a do-no-track tool for Web users. In the following months, Google, Mozilla and Microsoft all announced do-not-track features in their browsers. Those browsers offer simple ways for Web users to opt out of tracking efforts, said John Simpson, Consumer Watchdog's privacy director.

But websites are not required to honor the browsers' do-not-track instructions, Simpson said. The California bill "changes that and ensures consumers' choices will be honored," he added.

Seagate Shipping World's Slimmest Portable External Hard Drive

Seagate has started shipping its super-slim GoFlex Slim external hard-drive. Originally announced at this year's Consumer Electronics Show (CES), Seagate' claims that its latest is the World's thinnest portable drive, which, at 9mm thick, is around the same thickness as a regular number two pencil.

The portable drive, which measures in at 124mm by 78mm by 9mm, is both USB 2.0- and USB 3.0-friendly, and comes with a default 320GB capacity. Seagate were also keen to stress the drives interoperability with both Mac and PC's.

The Go Flex Slim is shipping now for just under $100 and comes with a 3-year limited warranty.

Acer Iconia Tablet Joins the Party

The Acer Iconia Tab A500 is now available for pre-order at Best Buy for only $449. The tablet costs less than its rivals, and brings a lot to the table, so this may be the tablet that some have been waiting for.

First, let's take a look at what you get for your $450. The Iconia A500 is a 10.1-inch tablet running Android 3.0 "Honeycomb" - just like the Motorola Xoom. Other than the fact that it has only half of the 32GB storage that comes in the Xoom, the hardware specs on the two tablets are actually almost identical. It has the same dual-core 1GHz processor, the same 1GB of RAM, and the same half-inch thickness as the Xoom, but weighs slightly more at 1.7 pounds.

One thing that sets the Iconia A500 apart is its graphics capabilities. The Acer tablet has an Nvidia GeForce graphics core capable of delivering 720p HD on the tablet, or playing 1080p HD video on a monitor or TV with its HDMI port.

It is inevitable that the tablet will also be compared against the iPad 2, so let's stack them up. The Iconia has vastly superior cameras on both

the front and the back of the tablet. It has the same 16GB of internal storage as an equivalent iPad 2, but the Acer tablet also has an SD memory card slot capable of adding 32GB of removable data, and it has a USB 2.0 port. Then, there's the fact that the Acer Iconia tablet is compatible with Adobe Flash.

On paper, the Iconia makes a compelling case against the iPad 2. The iPad 2 has a smaller display, and it is thinner and lighter than the Acer tablet. Aside from that, though, the differences come down to user experience and other intangibles that are subjective, and don't compare well on paper. Still, the iPad 2 has sold 2.6 million units since its launch, while the Motorola Xoom has managed only about 100,000 with a two-week head start, so those intangibles must count for something.

Money matters, though, and undercutting the price of the equivalent iPad 2 is bound to catch the eye of bargain-conscious tablet buyers. If you are looking to join the tablet revolution, you should at least take a look at the Acer tablet to see if it's the right one for you.

Firefox 5 and Beyond: What's Next?

Mozilla has some big plans for future versions of Firefox, including Internet Explorer 9-style dynamic jump lists, new sharing capabilities, identity management, and the end of the home button.

Firefox 4 is less than two weeks old, and already the folks at Mozilla are hard at work to keep their promise of releasing Firefox 5, 6, and 7 by the end of 2011. The next iteration of Firefox is expected to be ready for download by the summer.

At the moment, Firefox 5 is still in early development so Mozilla may delay certain features currently being discussed until future releases. In fact, some of the features discussed below, such as the home tab, were originally slated for Firefox 4 so you can never tell when a feature might actually make it into Firefox. It's also possible that Mozilla could cancel certain features entirely. With than in mind, here's a look at what Mozilla has planned for Firefox 5 and beyond in 2011.

Mozilla looks set to integrate its Prism add-on with Firefox 5 and include new enhancements such as IE9-style dynamic jumplists.

Prism, currently available for Firefox 3 through 3.6, lets you place a shortcut to sites or Web apps right in your taskbar (Windows) or dock (OSX). When you launch the site shortcut it opens as a separate process from your main Firefox browser, and can include a variety of app-like functions such as notifications when you receive a new mail message.

Based on current UI design proposals, Mozilla may add menus to Prism Web apps so you can access a site menu right in your browser. This feature would depend on the Website implementing the option. Desktop-accessible site menus is exactly what Microsoft included for IE9 with its dynamic jumplists feature used by sites such as Facebook, The New York Times, Windows Live, and PCWorld.

Unlike Microsoft, however, Mozilla may offer the option to access Website menus directly from the browser tab as a drop-down instead of

right clicking on the taskbar or dock. This decision would be consistent with Firefox's design of the new orange Firefox button that houses most of the browser's menus in Firefox 4 as a drop-down menu.

Firefox 5 may dump the home button and replace it with a permanent home tab instead, according to a list of new Firefox features on Mozilla's user experience page.

Mozilla has been talking about a permanent home tab since the early days of Firefox 4, so it's not clear what is the status of this feature.

In late 2009, Mozilla discussed including dynamic content in the home tab such as social networking updates and RSS feeds instead of providing a link to a specific website such as iGoogle or Yahoo. If you want to read up on current thoughts about the home tab, check out this discussion on bugzilla.

Mozilla wants to enhance the sharing features for later versions of Firefox. The new sharing feature would let you integrate your logins for social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter into Firefox. Then you would be able to click an icon in the URL address bar that would automatically let you share a link to specific Web pages with your Twitter followers or Facebook friends.

Mozilla plans to beefing up Firefox's account management features by allowing you to save login credentials for multiple accounts at once.

It's not the most exciting feature, but Mozilla is finally working on an integrated PDF viewer for Firefox. This means you won't have to download PDFs to your hard drive to see them or rely on Google's "Quick View" option to see the PDF in Google Docs.

Don't worry, download fans - you will still have the option to save PDFs to your hard drive if you want to view them offline.

Mozilla has a lot of work ahead of it to get three more versions of Firefox finished by the end of 2011, but it looks like some great new features are coming to the open source browser.

Malware Detection Will Be Added To Chrome Browser

Users of Google's Chrome browser will soon receive alerts telling them that files they're about to download may contain malicious software. The search giant and growing software pioneer announced on its Online Security Blog this week that a new feature, available first to developers, will work with its Safe Browsing Application Programming Interface, which enables client applications to check URLs against Google's blacklists of suspected phishing and malware pages. That list is regularly updated.

"It's easy to find sites hosting free downloads that promise one thing but actually behave quite differently," wrote Moheeb Abu Rajab of the Google Security Team on the blog. "These downloads may even perform actions without the user's consent, such as displaying spam ads, performing click fraud, or stealing other users' passwords. Such sites usually don't attempt to exploit vulnerabilities on the user's computer system. Instead, they use social engineering to entice users to download

and run the malicious content."

Growing detection methods may be turning the tables on spammers and hackers. Madrid-based cloud-security company Panda last month reported a decrease in infected computers detected by its online ActiveScan, from 50 percent in January to 39 percent the following month. Trojan programs were the most common threat at 61 percent, with more common viruses at 11.59 percent, and worms at nine percent.

The highest rates of infection were in China, Ukraine, Thailand and Taiwan. The U.S. ranked in the middle of the scale, while Australia had the lowest rate.

Google's update will begin small, as an experiment for certain users who subscribe to the Chrome development release channel, with later inclusion planned for the next stable release of Google Chrome. "We hope that the feature will improve our users' online experience and help make the Internet a safer place," Rajab said.

Google has invested heavily in security for Chrome, paying out thousands of dollars for exploit tips from non-employees, and those efforts paid off last month when no participant in the PWN2OWN hacking contest attempted to exploit the browser.

"I think Google is taking the right approach," said Chester Wisniewski, a senior security adviser at Sophos Canada, a consulting firm. "They are sort of following in our footsteps by chasing after the 'known malware destinations,' as we call them in SophosLabs."

Wisniewski said that given the staggering volume of web sites being infected daily, it's nearly impossible to keep track of them, but the downloads themselves change less frequently, "making the payload an easier target."

While Chrome is not hackproof, Google is trying hard, he added. "They were the first to introduce HSTS support, they are a founding member in stopbadware.org, and they seem to understand the importance of trust on the web. There seems to be a race between Microsoft, Mozilla and Google in the security space, and I heartily welcome the competition to do right by their customers."

Gmail Receives Some Love, Becomes Less Annoying

Google has boosted Gmail with several small features that make it significantly less annoying. Google says the tweaks have come directly from its suggestions page, whereby users can comment on what irks them.

Some tweaks are so obvious it's amazing the original way of working ever made it into Gmail. For example, quickly creating a filter based on a message you're reading wouldn't return you to the original message once the filter was made. It does now.

Other tweaks should have been around since day one. Gmail has always added anybody you reply to you to your contacts list. This is useful but it can also lead to address books that are massive - I've been using Gmail since 2004 and have amassed 1400 reply addresses. I e - mail around 10 of them regularly and have no idea who the rest are.

An overstuffed address book can be a particular issue when syncing contacts with a phone, for example, when you can end - up with a massive phone contacts list.

Well, now you can switch off automatic addition of contacts. To do so, click Settings and look at the entries under the heading that reads Create Contacts for Auto - Complete.

Additionally, there's now an undo history attached to the contacts component that means you can restore the list to a previous state, within a 30 - day window. Again, this can be useful when syncing with devices like phones, which have a habit of pruning or updating entries without permission.

Want to explore keyboard shortcuts? Hitting Shift+? will now show a pop-up window showing popular examples, even if keyboard shortcuts are switched off. Bear in mind this list varies depending on which mode Gmail is at the time - you'll see a different list when composing a mail than you will when browsing your contacts list, for example.

There's now a dedicated Refresh button at the top of the screen that should update the display with new messages. This is useful considering Gmail tends to do odd things like showing your Inbox an unread entry, without actually showing the new message in the list.

Perhaps the most useful new feature is address debugging when you're sending group e - mails. Previously, if you typed a list of addresses in a new e - mail and one had a problem (perhaps you'd typed a space in it), Gmail would alert you to a problem but not provide specifics. Now it will tell you the errant addresses in a dialog box. I'd have liked to have seen something more intuitive, such as highlighting the badly formed addresses, but this is better than nothing.

The tweaks are typical examples of Google's organic approach to improving its software, which contrasts strongly with Microsoft's approach of providing major periodic updates that can confuse users. Of course, updating in this way wouldn't be possible if services like Gmail weren't based in the cloud. And because we all access the software online, Google never has to worry about rolling out changes and the problems that arise, such as different versions on different computers.

Windows 8 To Replace Your Toolbar with a Ribbon

Just hours after an early build of Microsoft's new Windows 8 operating system leaked we're starting to get a good idea of how the latest version of Windows is shaping up.

Intrepid users have already begun mining the build and a major departure besides the OS's new welcome screen is already evident. Microsoft seems to have replaced the toolbar in the explorer window with the Ribbon user interface currently used Microsoft Office programs, including Word, Excel, and PowerPoint.

Once you've logged in, the most noticeable change to Windows is the new Ribbon interface on every Explorer window. At this stage, the Ribbon UI is in a pretty confused state and doesn't seem to have some of its

functionality, so it’s hard to tell exactly how successful this switch will be. Within Windows even suggests some disagreement may exist within Microsoft about using the new interface at all.

Also unclear is whether this change is permanent for all devices. The current build of Windows 8 has a toggle to return the toolbar and menus we’ve all grown accustomed to, but it’s not clear whether this will make it to the final version of Windows 8 or if it’s just a temporary measure while the design of the Ribbon gets ironed out.

This is a very early build, so many features, such as specialized tablet support, haven’t yet made their way in. Still, even this early on, we can say with some certainty that Windows 8 will bring some dramatic changes to the OS.

Twitter Disables New Version of Website

Twitter experienced service disruptions on Tuesday, displaying an older version of the social networking website to some users and becoming completely inaccessible to others.

A message on Twitter’s Web page that provides updates on the service’s status said: "We’ve temporarily disabled #NewTwitter. Our engineers are working on re-enabling it and we’ll update you shortly."

Twitter, which allows users to send short, 140-character messages to groups of "followers," has more than 200 million registered accounts and has become a popular communications service with businesses, celebrities and protesters in the Middle East.

Last month Twitter announced that it had moved its infrastructure to a new home at an undisclosed location, which the company said would allow it to constantly "stay abreast" of its capacity needs and provide greater reliability.

But a custom-built datacenter in Utah that was meant to house Twitter’s gear has been plagued with problems, according to people familiar with the matter, forcing Twitter to move most of the site’s operations to a facility in Sacramento, California instead.

Tuesday’s disruptions meant that some people were using the version of the Twitter site that preceded a redesign unveiled in September. Other Twitter users were unable to log on at all, and were greeted with a page informing them that "something is technically wrong" and promising to have things "back to normal soon."

A Twitter spokeswoman said the company had no details to provide beyond the statements on its special technical status Web page.

Happy 20th Birthday, Linux: The Celebrations Begin

The Linux Foundation on Wednesday kicked off what will be several months of celebrations in honor of the 20th anniversary of the Linux operating system with a range of festivities and events as well as key

news announcements from three of its working groups.

A new 20th Anniversary Website marks the occasion with a summary of the various initiatives planned for the upcoming months, including a new training scholarship and contests.

Released to the public by creator Linus Torvalds back in 1991, Linux has become an essential part of the computing world, where it quietly powers many of the modern innovations we take for granted. Torvalds is now a fellow at the Linux Foundation, which is dedicated to fostering the growth of the free and open source operating system.

In its short new video (embedded below), the Linux Foundation recounts many of the highlights of Linux's tale. It's also inviting fans of the operating system to create and submit their own to its third annual video contest, however, which for the first time Torvalds himself will judge.

From now through July 2, the video contest seeks user-generated videos that celebrate Linux while demonstrating the impact of the operating system on computing, business, or culture over the last 20 years and today. The winner will get registration and hotel expenses to attend LinuxCon North America, LinuxCon Europe, SXSW 2012, or the LA Film Festival.

"The story of Linux has many chapters and there are literally no limits on how the operating system will innovate in the future," said Amanda McPherson, the Linux Foundation's vice president of marketing and developer programs. "We're looking forward to seeing how people choose to illustrate the impact Linux is having on computing and our society."

You can see winners of the contest from 2010 and 2009 on the Linux.com site.

This year the foundation is also hosting a T-shirt design contest, while a 20th Anniversary Video Booth will be onsite at Linux Foundation events throughout the year to record fans' personal messages and favorite memories of the operating system. Linux.com will also host an exclusive series highlighting some of the most interesting Linux stories from the last 20 years.

A new Linux Foundation Scholarship Program, meanwhile, will focus on training the Linux developers who will shape the next 20 years of computing. Details on the program will be announced soon.

Then, too, there's the working-group news announced Wednesday at the foundation's Collaboration Summit in San Francisco, including the availability of the Yocto Project Release 1.0 and version 5.0 of the Carrier Grade Linux specification as well as the launch of a new High Availability working group.

There's no doubt that we all have much to appreciate about Linux and the two decades of freedom it's already provided.

In addition, though, there's also plenty to look forward to. With Ubuntu promising to shake up the mainstream and Red Hat on the verge of billion-dollar revenues, for example, I'm betting the next 20 years will be even better.

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